



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow or Ice — Failure to Self-Arrest

Oregon, Mt. Hood, South Side

On February 13, I was descending Mt. Hood with my friend Miha Šumi, 35, when he lost his footing and fell several hundred feet, sustaining injuries that ended his life.

Miha and I were part of a group of four climbers from the Portland area. We made an unremarkable ascent up the standard south side of Mt. Hood. After some deliberation, I split off from the group to solo a slightly harder objective near the top, a decision that could rightfully be criticized, but one that was ultimately inconsequential.

Shortly thereafter, Miha and I reconvened on the gentle slope underneath the summit, where he informed me that the other two in our group were moving slowly and would probably wait below on the Hogsback. I confirmed this with them via text. We proceeded to the summit, where we sat for several minutes, eating, hydrating, taking photos, and talking about future mountaineering goals. It was my 15th time on Mt. Hood's summit and I believe Miha's fifth. There were a lot of people still on the way up, and we agreed to descend the Old Chute, as we thought it would be less crowded than the narrow Pearly Gates.

We traversed the summit ridge to the Old Chute and started down. Soon we were both overheating and paused to take off some layers. Miha was carrying a 50cm Black Diamond Venom tool along with his regular long ice axe, but had stowed the tool on his pack since the downclimbing had been trivial. I kept my two ice tools out, mostly due to laziness, not wanting to fuss with the various leashes and backpack straps. We noted that a lot of ice was beginning to fall from the surrounding cliffs. We agreed we should try to descend directly downhill, staying out from under the cliffs on either side, and then quickly traverse over to the Hogsback at the bottom of the crater, where the terrain is relatively flat. We continued down, mostly facing out from the slope.

About halfway down the Old Chute, I heard a noise and turned around to see Miha, about 30 feet behind me, sliding out of control. I do not know what caused him to fall. I do not recall seeing any significant falling ice at this time. I remember seeing Miha in a good self-arrest position but in the middle of a small bounce off the slope, so that the pick of his axe was not in contact with the surface, though I question the reliability of this memory. I had time to swing one ice tool in front of me and reach out with my right hand as Miha slid past. I managed to grab something that felt like a backpack strap, but chose to let go, as I immediately felt myself getting pulled over backward. Everyone I share this with tells me that I made the right decision, but of course I will live the rest of my life wondering what would have happened if I had held on.

Miha continued to fall, and I feared he would end up in one of the exposed fumaroles in the Hot Rocks area, but he slid completely through the bottom of the crater and continued down the gully to the west of Crater Rock. The slope angle increased, and he went briefly out of view. When he came back into sight, he was tumbling, obviously unconscious, before finally sliding to a stop, roughly 600 vertical feet below. I called 911 and began downclimbing. I was shaken and moved extremely slowly, as I suddenly found myself completely unable to assess the security of my footwork and crampons.

I reached Miha a couple of minutes after two other people. I was surprised to see that he was alive, and that, though unconscious, he didn't have any obvious life-threatening injuries. We quickly established that two of us had WFR certification, and we began a medical assessment while the other person went a ways uphill to spot and deflect any falling debris. Miha had stopped sliding in an

unfortunate place, as the narrow gully above funneled falling ice and rocks from the western half of the crater directly toward us. The first person on scene called 911, and we were in regular contact with a dispatcher, who informed us that a National Guard helicopter was on its way. After some time, another person arrived, helped us record medical notes, and assisted with blocking falling debris.

Miha had sustained severe internal injuries during the fall. Around 45 minutes after I reached the scene, he stopped breathing. At this point we were unable to detect a pulse, so we began CPR. With my marginal amount of medical training, I hoped the helicopter would arrive with an AED (automated external defibrillator). Upon subsequent reflection, it is obvious that due to the nature of Miha's injuries and the lack of immediate emergency room access, there was really no chance of us making a difference. We continued CPR for around 90 minutes until the helicopter arrived. A paramedic was lowered, examined Miha, and told us to stop CPR. The rest of the day is a bit of a blur. The helicopter returned and lowered a litter. We helped place Miha into the litter, and the helicopter raised him and the paramedic.

I cannot tell this story without also expressing my profound gratitude toward everyone who helped. The day Miha died remains the worst of my life. But I am fortunate that within that experience I was also able to witness humanity at its best. All three of the other first responders came to the aid of someone they didn't know, and stayed to help despite the risk posed by continual falling rock and ice. I am also thankful for the Portland Mountain Rescue team that helped my friends and some other shaken climbers down from the Hogsback.

Analysis

With the burden of grief and the benefit of hindsight, it is inevitable to speculate and second-guess. Since the accident, I have revisited our decisions countless times, but I still believe they were fundamentally sound. What happened to Miha was likely the result of a single misstep and loss of footing, at a precisely inopportune moment, followed by a failure to self-arrest. Neither of us committed any glaring, obvious mistakes that led logically to the accident. After two years of reflection and around 25 additional climbs of Mt. Hood, I do feel like I can offer a few productive insights on the conditions and our decision-making process.

The slopes on the standard routes between the bottom of the crater and the summit are awkwardly steep, in the sense that it is often not clear whether a walking or climbing body position is best. It is common to see some groups pitching out the Old Chute, climbing with two ice tools, while others nonchalantly "walk" up at the same time. In addition to comprising the steepest sections of the standard routes, the slopes out of the crater also are unfortunately the ones with the most objective hazard from rockfall, icefall, and avalanches. These factors combine to create a familiar alpine scenario in which climbers must balance the need to move securely with moving quickly through an inherently dangerous area.

The day of the accident, Miha and I were descending by cautiously "walking," facing out from the slope. We were both comfortable on the terrain and had descended this way before. This was an appropriate choice for the conditions at the top of the Old Chute. But as we got lower, I believe the surface became smoother and icier.

There was significant icefall from the cliffs inside the crater. This distracting factor may have caused us not to evaluate the changing surface conditions and whether they warranted a change in our method of descent. We had observed no falling debris on the way up, but warming from the morning sun and the way the recent rime had formed somehow combined to produce an unusually high volume of falling ice. While descending, I was frequently pausing to check for falling debris behind us and to plot a course that stayed out from the fall lines of the cliffs above. Though it is normal to constantly identify and mitigate hazards in the mountains, this was a bit more intense and distracting than usual. I do not recall feeling particularly stressed, but I am sure the falling ice in close proximity also prompted us to move more urgently than we would have in calmer circumstances.

If there is a lesson to take away from this accident, it is to constantly re-evaluate terrain, conditions,

and technique choices. It is easy to get tunnel vision, particularly when things become stressful or distracting. In our case, we may have been so focused on avoiding the dangers from above that we neglected the changing surface conditions and the need to alter our technique.

Miha was a safe, conservative climber, careful to avoid objectives he thought might be over his head. He was well-trained, having taken a multi-month climbing course from a local organization, and had successfully climbed Mt. Hood on multiple occasions. On all of our trips together, he appeared competent and comfortable with the terrain and his gear. Though I do believe there are some potentially valuable lessons in his death, I also believe that it was the result of a simple, innocent mistake, one that anyone could make, and more a reflection of the inherent risk in the mountains than of any poor decision-making, gear choice, or technique. (Source: Matt Zavortink.)

Editor's Note: This report replaces an earlier one published in the 2019 edition of Accidents in North American Climbing. The earlier version contained incorrect details and has been deleted. We are grateful to Matt Zavortink for providing this thoughtful first-person account of the events that led to his friend's death.

Images

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